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COMPOSITION AS ONE OF THE ARTS

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In the teaching of composition and literature, as also in literary criticism, terms are frequently used suggesting comparison with the art of painting. "Color," "background," "word-painting"—these and many more have an accepted meaning. Moreover, the word "tone," adopted originally from the field of music, belongs now to each of three arts. The verb "to compose" is distinctly associated with the fields of music and literature, while the noun "composition" has a special meaning for the painter.

In the work of English classes, this last expression, familiar as it is, seems ordinarily far from the realm of any art. Instead, the word "composition" carries with it the onerous connotation of sentence-structure, punctuation, grammatical usage. Perhaps we have allowed ourselves to be occupied entirely with the mechanics of writing; or perhaps it is after all impossible, in dealing with immature minds, to teach more than this necessary correctness. But it has long seemed to me that we are making a mistake if we limit our attention to mere mechanics, or even to substance; and we may here wisely learn from the other arts.

The expert teacher of piano today devotes comparatively little attention to finger-exercises and scales. Instead, he chooses simple compositions which incidentally give the necessary practice but which also give opportunity to cultivate the art of playing, the art of appreciating, in a word, the *art* of music. Moreover, the child, almost from the beginning, is led himself to compose pieces which are correct in form, which have all the marks of artistic workmanship, and which, indeed, occasionally are actual bits of music. In order to play an instrument excellently, it is necessary to understand and appreciate the composition played, and none the less necessary to be able to express what one finds, that is, to interpret.

In these respects then the art of playing an instrument finds its parallel in the general field of literature—not, to be sure, in the

art of writing, but in the art of reading. Yet in both cases, as in any study of any art—and this is the point that is sometimes disputed and more often neglected—unless the child is so talented as to be thought of as a performer from the beginning, the chief object is the same: the enriching of life which comes from the appreciation of art. For what else is culture than the enriching of life?

Every work of art, whatever else it is or is not, is the expression of some person's vision or impression of life in one phase or another; it is a bit of his personality set forth in tones or colors or clay—or in words. In the view of John C. Van Dyke, the critic, "Art is an illusion of nature produced by a personality."

Now, it seems to me that, in teaching literature or any other art, unless we keep this idea before our pupils, we are robbing them of their birthright. And indeed, the teaching of other arts in this respect has gone far ahead of the teaching of literature. The pupil in the primary grades is instructed how to draw and paint correctly as regards perspective, but artistically also as regards colors and composition. Nor is he kept busy for years learning merely the handling of the brush and pencil, although to be sure he never is done with this part of his study. Yet in teaching the art of writing we spend years on the mechanics, and consider the last year of the high-school course or the first year in college early enough to begin to look for artistic results in practice or for real appreciation in reading. The reason for this difference lies partly in the dual (if not quadruple!) object in the study of English, and partly in the superior difficulty and complexity of the mere mechanics of the art of writing. It is far harder at the beginning, I presume, to handle a sentence than to handle a paintbrush. As to the complete technique of the two arts, there is probably little difference in difficulty. Certainly there is more in either than begins to be mastered by even the most talented high-school pupil—or teacher, we might add.

Our mistake has been, I believe, in separating, in thought if not in practice, the study of composition and the study of literature. They are not two arts but one, and each is a phase of that art no less than the other. If we teach composition merely or chiefly in

order that pupils may know how to speak and write correctly, we have not advanced very far from the days of the three R's with all their utilitarian outlook. If we leave the study of artistic writing for advanced and closely limited classes in "journalism," we are neglecting an opportunity to enlarge the horizon of the great mass of pupils, of those, indeed, who especially need such culture.

In every grade at least of the high school it is possible, I believe, to keep in the minds of our pupils the aim of speaking and writing artistically, and above all the aim of being able to estimate at its true value and to enjoy the artistic speaking and writing of those more talented than themselves. Whether or not composition and literature are taught by the same teacher, frequent reference to literature familiar to the class may be made. A set of papers may be rapidly read aloud by the teacher, comments of approval and disapproval being made, perhaps one to a paper. Pupils soon grow to see quickly a good bit of phrasing, a special kind of unity, a good climax of effect, and both pupils and teacher may draw the flattering comparisons to some piece of literature just read. For this work it is of course valuable to base the composition lessons in some way on the literature recently studied. I am aware that this is just what is often done, though not always with the object I have in mind.

Not all lessons in composition need put the emphasis on artistic qualities. But when such results are found, the writers should of course be encouraged. A clear distinction may be made between exercises, on the one hand, whose object is correctness in some form of punctuation, or in sentence-structure, in paragraphing, or in spelling, and lessons, on the other hand, which aim at interest, charm, beauty. In the case of the second kind, the marking should not be restricted by incorrectness of form, unless this be so extreme as to throw the paper out of consideration. How discouraging it is to a pupil who has imagination, a clear brain, a good vocabulary, to find none of these appreciated, while his phlegmatic neighbor who writes prim, correct sentences is graded high. If on the other hand, a pupil finds the mechanics of his work too poor for consideration, he will readily rewrite the paper for the sake of the appreciation which he knows awaits the really excellent phase of his

work. And the chances are that the next time he will guard against the humiliation as best he can. The inspiring value of creative work can hardly be overestimated; it is the redemption of many a boy, at least as regards his writing. And, after all, genius, talent, personality, character, skill are no less important than wearing appropriate and attractive clothing, keeping the hair well combed, and the house in order! These last, to be sure, are in their degree expressions of the personality, and in their degree, like the mechanics of composition, should be emphasized.

An easy objection to studying composition as the art of pleasing expression rather than as a manner of necessary expression is that in so doing we should be likely to neglect that fundamental, necessary mechanical ability. This, it is claimed, being the foundation, should come first. But when we are building a house even the foundation cannot be laid until the plan of the whole is constructed; foundations are not in every sense first in time, even though they may sometimes seem first in importance.

As one means toward making composition work a study of the art of literature, we may wisely keep in mind certain principles of art in general, explaining them occasionally, and illustrating from the other arts. Reference to a few of the leading principles will serve to show what is meant. It may be remarked that in dealing with classes in composition, rhetoric, or literature, technical terms, except those which in part explain themselves, can generally be avoided.

When we are talking of the art of expression, the first question may naturally relate to the significance of that which is expressed. Here parallels in every art can easily be found, and one element of greatness is observed—one which, we must grant, is disputed by lovers of art for art's sake. Now, in order that this more or less significant idea or feeling may find expression, it must be coherently thought out, and the resulting piece of work must show organization. Every part of the composition must show not only its relation to the main idea, but also its relation to the other parts. To illustrate from a well-known painting: in the Sistine Madonna, if the angels were looking distinctly away from the central pair of figures, we should have lack of unity, lack of organization, lack of

coherence, and perhaps we may add, lack of mass, that emphasis which the original idea demands. But there are unities of various kinds: the harmony of coloring, in spite of its contrasts, produces a unity of tone or atmosphere. The translucent grayness of Andrea del Sarto's pictures is a good illustration. Again, in the Sistine Madonna, the unity of feeling would have been disturbed if demons instead of cherubs had found a place. As to the arrangement of parts, observe that there is a central figure or pair of figures as well as a central idea. Light, coloring, relative position, everything draws the attention to this central group. This suggests perhaps the principle of climax in writing. Even the principle of suspense, as found in the story and often in the paragraph or the periodic sentence, finds a parallel in the painting; the full meaning does not come to us at once, but everything leads us toward that meaning. In order that we may be led, instead of leaping, we have transitions. In amateur writing we have abrupt transitions and in amateur painting there is no more striking defect, especially in the work of the copyist, than the absence of blending in the tones. Hard outlines are characteristic. Again, the principle of proportion finds easy illustration in the art of painting: crude perspective can be observed by any pupil, and a poor balance of parts in a piece of writing can be pointed out to him. The background or setting of any piece of writing has its counterpart in almost any picture; and so too very often, as in the case of a story within a story, there is an analogy to the frame. Finally, the impression made by the whole piece of work may be urged. Whether or not all principles have been studied and applied, the result may or may not produce the impression intended; it may or may not succeed in expressing the composer's idea. This is apparently the paramount and tantalizing test of all art.

Unity calls for economy and selection: there must be no element which detracts from the general effect and none which does not positively contribute. This idea is easily grasped, but it is not always observed that in literature or elsewhere true economy implies a careful estimate of the audience for whom the work is intended, and then a distinct trust in the intelligence of that audience, on the assumption that some things will be guessed.

Here of course is involved the selection of detail, the purpose of writing or painting, and the point of view, literal and figurative. If a work of art is an expression of one's own impression of life (and this is as true in its way of the child's narration of an incident as of a Beethoven symphony), then must it represent not what exists, but what the composer sees, hears, and feels. Monet, Turner, and other impressionists saw little of detail, if we think of seeing in its deeper sense, and felt much of atmosphere, of general effect. Meissonnier saw, and felt, we may say, an infinity of detail. The one style may be called subjective, the other objective, but the difference is not one of method so much as of personality. And there is no criterion for ranking the art of the two types; each has its place. So, too, the characteristic, distinctive work of each child in writing, I may add, has its place. We may not maintain fixed patterns in the teaching of writing any more than in the building of character. However, since we consider an audience as an important corollary of the desire for expression, the extreme of subjectiveness, the overdose of the individual with an underdose of the typical or universal, means the want of a hearing. Consequently, even a child should be taught not only to keep his eye turned inward so as to find his own impressions or thoughts of things, but also to keep his eye on the object and on the audience.

The impression or idea then, in finding its expression, must make a selection of detail. The selection of certain notes and chords in a piece of music, and their frequent repetition, give a certain unified impression to the whole. The emphasis of one detail of color or form or arrangement, the repression of another, make the difference between the poet's description of a landscape and the real-estate agent's. Neither has presented what actually exists. Again, the novelist may have models for his characters in real life, but he selects his details so that the result is the character he sees in his mind's eye to be appropriate for the story. Moreover, it is by selection of detail, by emphasis, by repression, that he makes the character seem individual enough to awaken interest and typical enough to maintain sympathy. Neither the character nor the story are true, in the literal sense, but they must be, within the limits of reality or romance which he has prescribed for himself, true to life.

This is one of the most difficult facts for a pupil to grasp, as well as one of the most important. It can be reinforced by a reference to painting: the artist painting a landscape portrays not everything that is there, not everything that he sees (a stump in the foreground, for instance), but those things only which he cares to see, which contribute to that inner vision which he wishes to give to the world. He may even introduce details that are not present in the actual landscape. He may choose for his picture a different kind of weather than that in which he paints—provided only he has previously made a sufficient study of that other kind of weather in its effect on landscapes. In other words, the artist selects, from among the actual or possible details of light, color, outline, position, only those which will express or to some extent suggest what he wishes to put before the public.

Just here there comes to one's attention another of the principles vital to all art, as it is also a fundamental law of psychology. What we suggest often carries more weight than what we express fully. As we make use of the principle in the art of teaching, so too the artist makes use of it in his particular field. The writer perhaps more than any other is aware of its importance. Not only do words have their plain straightforward meanings; they have also a fringe of meaning which varies to some extent with the period, with the context, with the reader, and with the special circumstances surrounding the reading. It is this connotation which makes the choice of words so important. Many a poem, or line, because of changing connotation, has lost for us its power to charm. Ideas or feelings have become associated with certain words, which in no wise belong to them. It is the writer's task to study the association of ideas with words—indeed, words are nothing except for the association of ideas—and to select accordingly. As all words are symbols, their importance lying in what they stand for and not in what they are, so too in a greater degree all figures of speech are symbols, combinations of the original symbols which suggest a fresh vision of things. After words or figures have for a length of time been used in a certain connection, they hold the power to convey instantly this acquired significance; hence the chief power of quotation and allusion. But so also do they lose the power of conveying any but the frequently associated meaning;

hence the weakness of trite expression. Hence also the commonplace nature of many pictures and pieces of music. It is not a mere love of novelty that dictates a demand for newness in art; it is the fact rather that the value of art depends on its power to give us the experience—or an approximate of it—which the artist has put into coherent, concrete form.

The artist, then, through the selection of details and words which by their appeal to the senses stimulate thought and emotion, aims to give us the experience which he himself has had. If he is successful, he gives us the same thrill of pleasure, the same pang of sympathy. He uses words, color, materials of every sort, which directly or indirectly appeal to the senses, because that is the way he himself acquired the experience, and the way we must needs get the approximate of it. He begins with the concrete, the specific, as do we in our perception and thought of the world about us; and he proceeds by dint of selecting, grouping, emphasizing, repressing, to lead us to his final impression, which, if he be truly great, is more abstract and general than his first mere observation.

Of all the senses appealed to in writing, none holds a higher place than the sense of sight, possibly because we depend for our perception of the world more on the sense of sight than on any other. It is for this reason perhaps that we find in such common use the parallels between the art of writing and the art of painting. But in poetry, as to some extent in all writing, we are dependent also on the sense of sound. And it is not so much the actual sounds as their indirect suggestions, in rhyme, in alliteration, in assonance, in all the various shades of onomatopoeia, that we vaguely perceive without always estimating at full value. We say, and we let pupils say, that a passage is beautiful because the sounds are beautiful; whereas the fundamental value is the expressiveness or suggestiveness of the sounds. If the sounds are not appropriate, if they do not contribute to the chief effect, whether they are beautiful in themselves or not, they are not artistic.

The power of suggestion seems to involve imagination, a quality more subtle than the mere power of visualizing. Objects and words must stir in us more than their bare meaning, or we live a "colorless" life. Indeed, it is perhaps through this nimble, elusive,

indefinable power of imagination, more than through any other means, that we have the kind of life that we value. All real literature is imaginative, inasmuch as it uses constantly the power of suggestion. And all real literature, the speech and the essay as well as the poem or the story, has the power of enriching through imagination the lives of our pupils.

The principles of variety, of comparison and contrast, of the humor of incongruity, of symmetry, of rhythm, as well as the laws of unity, coherence, emphasis, economy, suggestion, and concreteness, can easily be illustrated from one or more of the other arts. But these are more than mere illustrations; they are actual counterparts. And, in occasionally calling attention to them, we are not only building up the pupil's power of discrimination in his own writing, and his taste in literature, but his appreciation of other arts as well. We do not need to teach him the science of aesthetics, but we do need to give him a broader and deeper view of art than he is apparently gaining at present.

There is opportunity everywhere in the high-school course for some work of this sort. If one principle could in a measure be taught in each term, we should do well. It is, I imagine, not until college days are half over that young people begin to think of composition as one of the arts, and begin to grasp the principles of all art. But even the child of fourteen can easily grasp the idea, for instance, of the sounds of words as one of the means of expression; indeed, it is in teaching the *Twice-Told Tales*, and a few of the early English ballads to a first-year class, and in watching for results in their own writing, that I have found perhaps the greatest satisfaction along this line.

Needless to say, however, weaving into our teaching of composition and literature a few of the principles of art in general should not be expected to produce immediate and remarkable results in the style or in the literary appreciation of our high-school pupils. Rather, the objects to be attained are those toward which all our teaching aims, and which must always be largely a matter of faith—a feeling of the value of life, and the power of expressing that appreciation in look and in word and in deed, for the enrichment of others as well as ourselves.